

CRS Report for Congress

Iran: Ethnic and Religious Minorities

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Iran: Ethnic and Religious Minorities

Summary

Iran is home to approximately 69 million people who are ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse. The central authority is dominated by Persians who constitute 51% of Iran's population. Iranians speak diverse Indo-Iranian, Semitic, Armenian, and Turkic languages. The state religion is Shia, Islam.

After installation by Ayatollah Khomeini of an Islamic regime in February 1979, treatment of ethnic and religious minorities grew worse. By summer of 1979, initial violent conflicts erupted between the central authority and members of several tribal, regional, and ethnic minority groups. This initial conflict dashed the hope and expectation of these minorities who were hoping for greater cultural autonomy under the newly created Islamic State.

According to the State Department's *Human Rights Report 2006*, released on March 6, 2007, Iran's already poor human rights record "worsened" during the past year. The State Department's *Religious Freedom Report 2006*, released on September 15, 2006, also cited Iran for widespread human rights abuses (especially against the Baha'i faith), including summary executions, disappearances, torture, arbitrary arrest, detention, and discrimination against women.

For further information and analysis on Iran, and U.S. options, see CRS Report RL32048, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses*, by Kenneth Katzman.

This report will be updated as warranted.

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Iran: Ethnic and Religious Minorities

Background

Iran, with an estimated 69 million people, is ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse. The official state religion is Shiite Islam and the majority of its population is ethnically Persian. Iran's official language is Persian (the Persian term for which is Farsi), in which all government business and public instruction is conducted. However, millions of individuals from various ethnic, religious, and linguistic minority backgrounds also reside in Iran. These groups include Azeris, Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Baha'is, Sunni Muslims, and others.

To varying degrees these minorities face discrimination, particularly in employment, education, and housing, and they tend to live in underdeveloped regions. Over the years they have held protests demanding greater rights. Even though the constitution guarantees the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, in reality, the central government emphasizes the Persian and Shiite nature of the state. Analysts argue that globalization, a large number of organized ethnic groups and political activists in Europe and North America, and modern communications systems are making significant changes to the internal dynamics of the country.¹ International media and human rights agencies and associated organizations outside Iran are also helping these issues become known internationally.

Persian Dominance

Persians, who constitute 51% of Iran's population, dominate the central government of Iran. Persians are from the Indo-European tribes who settled the Iranian plateau and established the ancient Persian empire around 1000 BC. Experts argue that Persians, with only a slim majority, possess a distinct sense of superiority over other Iranians and regard themselves as true heirs of Iran's history and tradition and the guardians and perpetrators of its legacies.² Under both the monarchy and the Islamic Republic, Persians were, and remain, the beneficiaries of government economic and social policies. Geographically, the provinces principally settled by Persians continue to be the most developed provinces in the country, in spite of the affirmative policies adopted in favor of other regions of the country. Furthermore, the state run radio and television broadcasts are predominantly in Persian, and only a limited amount of programs are run in minority languages.

¹ Massoume Price, *Iran's Diverse Peoples; A Reference Source Book*, ABC-CLIO's Ethnic Diversity Within Nations Series, 2005.

² Sandra Mackey, *Iranians: Persia, Islam and the Soul of a Nation*, 1996.

Table 1. Iran at a Glance

Population:	69 million (2006 est.)
Ethnic groups:	Persian 51%, Azeri 24%, Gilaki and Mazandarani 8%, Kurd 7%, Arab 3%, Lur 2%, Baloch 2%, Turkmen 2%, other 1%
Religions:	Muslim 98% (Shi'a 89%, Sunni 9%), other (includes Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, and Baha'i) 2%
Languages:	Persian and Persian dialects 58%, Turkic and Turkic dialects 26%, Kurdish 9%, Luri 2%, Balochi 1%, Arabic 1%, Turkish 1%, other 2%

Sources: U.S. Department of State, *Background Notes* October, 2006; CIA, *World Factbook*, updated on May 15, 2007.

Under the Islamic Regime

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic was ratified in November 1979, which was a major setback for human rights generally, and for the rights of women and religious minorities in particular.³ Under the new Constitution, certain religious minorities such as Zoroastrians, Christians, Jews, and Sunni Muslims are recognized. Followers of the Baha'i faith, who form a sizable group among religious minorities in Iran, are not recognized by the Constitution. A country report on human rights practices for 2006, released on March 6, 2007, states that “the government’s poor human rights record worsened, and it continued to commit numerous and serious abuses such as: severe restrictions on freedom of religion; lack of government transparency; violence and legal and societal discrimination against women, ethnic and religious minorities, incitement to anti-Semitism among others.”

Inside the country the communal relationship between the majority Persians and ethnic minorities seems to have changed when the Islamic Republic was formed in 1979. In part, this was a result of the Persian community’s identification with the Islamic State. In the early days of the communal conflict, the regime relied on

³ “Unlike the Constitutional Revolution, in which the clergy had lost most of their powers, the Islamic Revolution brought them back in full force with unparalleled power. The first revolution (1906) had been fueled by western ideologies such as nationalism, liberalism, secularism, and socialism. In the revolution of 1979, a thoroughly clerical constitution with Islamic codes was created with conscious efforts to condemn such western concept as nationalism and democracy. In this new Constitution, article 4 proclaimed that all penal, financial, civil, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic Shari'a. This principle applied absolutely and generally to all articles of the constitution itself as well as to all other laws and regulations.” Massoume Price, *Iran's Diverse Peoples; A Reference Source Book*, ABC-CLIO's Ethnic Diversity Within Nations Series, 2005.

volunteers from the Persian and Azeri communities to confront Kurdish, Baluchi, and Turkmen rebellions.⁴

History of Ethnic Grievances

Incidents of ethnic unrest in the outlying provinces are not without precedent.⁵ Kurds, Azeris, Turkmens, and Baluchis, as well as the Arabs, continue to occasionally demonstrate over perceived injustices with incidents of ethnic unrest. Their complaints cover economic issues such as insufficient jobs and underdevelopment that led to migration to urban centers and discrimination in getting government jobs. These minorities also note inadequate educational facilities for young people, few publications in their languages, and lack of culturally and linguistically inclusive local programming by state radio and television. They refer to poor governmental representation and allude to a lack of reconciliation over historical grievances. The state response to these incidents varies depending on their scale. Sometimes it resorts to means of repression such as arrest, but occasionally the central government will dispatch officials to the region to show interest and attempt to mollify the locals.

Recent Unrest

Although ethnic rioting in Iran has not been uncommon in the past, generally incidents of ethnic unrest seem to have risen steadily since President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad took office in 2005. Analysts argue that occasionally individuals and groups have briefly taken up arms, only to calm down again for years or decades.⁶ But rarely have so many snapped back at the government so furiously over so short a time. For example, in the past two years, Turks have rioted in the northwest, Baluchis have kidnaped and beheaded some government officials, Arabs have blown up oil pipelines in the southwest, and Kurdish guerillas have sniped continually at Iranian soldiers in the mountains bordering Iraq and Turkey. For these rash and abrupt outbursts, minority groups blame Ahmedinejad's "Shia Persian chauvinism" as a primary provocation, along with the government's abiding economic neglect.⁷

⁴ Abdollah Ramezanzadeh, *Internal and International Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict: The Case of Iran*, January 1996.

⁵ Bill Samii, "Iran: Bombings May Be Connected With Minorities, Election," at [<http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2005/iran-050613-rferl01.htm>].

⁶ Graeme Wood, "Iran: A Minority Report, Mapping the Rise of Discontent," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 298, No. 5, December 2006.

⁷ Ibid.

Major Ethnic Minority Groups

Although Iran is home to small pockets of Christians, Jews, Baha'is, and Turkmen, its primary minority ethnic groups are the Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, and Baluchis.⁸

Azeris

Roughly one out of every four Iranians is Azeri, making it Iran's largest ethnic minority at over 18 million (some Azeris put the number higher). The Turkic-speaking Azeri community is predominantly Shiite and resides mainly in northwest Iran along the border with Azerbaijan (whose inhabitants are more secular than their Azeri cousins in Iran) and in Tehran. Although they have grievances with the current regime in Tehran, most Azeris say they are not treated as second-class citizens and are more integrated into Iranian society, business, and politics (the Supreme Leader is an ethnic Azeri) than other minorities. A common complaint among Azeris is that the Iranian media often poke fun at them. In May 2006, violent demonstrations broke out in a number of northwest cities after a cartoon published in a state-run newspaper compared Azeris to cockroaches. Recently, in May 2007, hundreds of Iranian Azerbaijani linguistic and cultural rights activists were arrested in connection with demands that they should be allowed to be educated in their own language.

Kurds

Predominantly Sunni Muslim, the Kurds reside mainly in the northwest part of the country (so-called Iranian Kurdistan) and comprise around 7% of Iran's population. There are roughly 4 million Kurds living in Iran, compared to 12 million in Turkey and 6 million in Iraq. Unlike Iran's other minorities, many of its Kurds harbor separatist tendencies. Those tendencies in the past have created tensions within the state and have occasionally turned violent (the largest separatist related violent incident in recent years occurred in response to Turkey's February 1999 arrest of Abdullah Ocalan, then-leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party). The governments of Turkey and Iran fear that the creation of a semiautonomous state in northern Iraq might motivate their own Kurdish minorities to press for greater independence. But Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, a U.S.-based expert on Iranian foreign policy, says Iran's concern about Kurdish separatism does not approach the level of Turkey. Still, there have been repeated clashes between Kurds and Iranian security forces, the most recent of which was sparked by the July 2005 shooting of a young Kurd. Some experts say Israel has increased its ties with Iranian Kurds and boosted intelligence-gathering operations in northwest Iran in order to exploit ethnic fissures between the Kurds and the majority Shiite Persians.

⁸This section adapted from Lionel Beehner, "Iran's Ethnic Groups," *Backgrounder*, Council on Foreign Relations, November 29, 2006, at [http://www.cfr.org/publication/12118/].

Arabs

Along the Iranian-Iraqi border in southwest Iran is a population of some 3 million Arabs, predominantly Shiite. Arabs, whose presence in Iran stretches back 12 centuries, co-mingle freely with the local populations of Turks and Persians. During the 1980s, they fought on the side of the Iranians, not the Iraqi Arabs. However, as Sunni-Shiite tensions have worsened in the region, a minority of this group, emboldened by Iraqi Arabs across the border, have pressed for greater autonomy in recent years. In the southern oil-rich province of Khuzestan, clashes erupted in March 2006 between police and pro-independence ethnic Arab Iranians, resulting in three deaths and over 250 arrests (the protests were reportedly organized by a London-based group called The Popular Democratic Front of Ahwazi Arabs). In April 2005, rumors spread that the authorities in Tehran planned to disperse Arabs in the area leading to protests that turned violent, according to Human Rights Watch.

Baluchis

Iran has roughly 1.4 million Baluchis, comprising 2% of its population. Predominantly Sunni, they reside in the Iranian section of an area known as Baluchistan, a region divided between Pakistan and Iran. The southeastern province where Baluchis reside remains the least developed part of Iran and boasts high unemployment rates. That, plus the porous border between the two countries and perhaps the close cross-border cultural or tribal affinities of the Baluchis has encouraged widespread smuggling of various goods, including drugs. Iranian Baluchistan, despite holding few resources, remains an important region militarily because of its border with Pakistan. In early 2007, the Iranian government built a military base there. Tehran has also kept a watchful eye on Baluchi militants in the region. In March 2007, a group called Jundallah attacked a government motorcade which left 20 people dead, kidnaped a number of hostages, and executed at least one member of Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

Religious Minority Groups

Approximately 89% of Iranians are Shia Muslims.⁹ The rest, including Baha'i, Christian, Zoroastrian, Sunni Muslim, and Jewish communities, constitute around 11%. Despite their popularity in the country, the total membership of Sufi groups in the population is unclear due to a lack of reliable statistics. Reportedly, all religious minorities suffer varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing.

According to a *Human Rights Report 2006*, released by the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor on March 6, 2007, the Iranian government restricts freedom of religion. There was a further deterioration of the poor status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting

⁹ Military, "Iranian Religious Groups," Global Security.Org, at [http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/religion.htm].

period, most notably for Baha'is and Sufi Muslims.¹⁰ There were reports of imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on religious beliefs. Government actions and rhetoric created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all religious minorities, especially Baha'is and Sufi Muslims. To a lesser extent, Zoroastrians, evangelical Christians, and the small Jewish community were also targets of government harassment.

Government-controlled media, including broadcasting and print, intensified negative campaigns against religious minorities — particularly the Baha'is — following the June 2005 election of President Ahmadinejad. According to a published report, several congressional resolutions have condemned Iran's treatment of the Baha'is, including S.Con.Res. 57 (106th Congress), which passed the Senate on July 19, 2000, and H.Con.Res. 257, which passed the House on September 19, 2000. In the 109th Congress, partly in response to a May 2006 wave of arrests of Baha'is in Shiraz, H.Con.Res. 415, which passed the House on September 19, 2006, requested that the Administration emphasize that it regards Iran's treatment of the Baha'is as a significant factor in U.S. Iran policy.¹¹

The Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) closely monitors all religious activities. Individually, disciples of recognized religious minorities are not required to register with the authorities. However, their religious, community, and cultural organizations; schools; and public events are supervised closely.

Some of the major Iranian primary religious minorities include the following:¹²

Sunni Muslims

Iranian Sunni Muslims are the largest religious minority.¹³ The majority of Kurds, virtually all Baluchis and Turkomen, and a minority of Arabs are Sunnis, as are small communities of Persians in southern Iran and the region of Khorasan.¹⁴ Generally speaking, Iranian Shias are inclined to recognize Sunnis as fellow Muslims, but as those whose religion is incomplete. Reportedly Iran's Sunni population, which includes Kurds and Baluchis, complain that there is not a single Sunni mosque in the country (the authorities reportedly blocked one from recently being built in Tehran) and that the government has barred public displays of Sunni religion and culture. In towns with mixed populations in West Azarbaijan, the

¹⁰ *Iran: International Religious Freedom Report 2006*, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, at [<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71421.htm>].

¹¹ For further information and analysis on Iran and U.S. options, see CRS Report RL32048, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses*, by Kenneth Katzman.

¹² This section adapted from Military, "Iranian Religious Groups," Global Security.Org, at [<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/religion.htm>].

¹³ U.S. Department of State: *Iran: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2006*, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, March 6, 2007.

¹⁴ Military, Iranian Religious Groups, Global Security.Org, at [<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/religion.htm>].

Persian Gulf region, and Baluchestan va Sistan, tensions between Shias and Sunnis existed both before and after the Iranian Revolution. Religious tensions have been highest during major Shia observances, especially Moharram.

Baha'i

There are an estimated 300,000-350,000 adherent Baha'is throughout the country. Iranian Baha'is are not allowed to teach or practice their faith or to maintain links with co-religionists abroad. Tehran continues to imprison and detain Baha'is based on their religious beliefs. Authorities in Tehran consider Baha'is as apostates because of their claim to a religious revelation subsequent to that of the Prophet Mohammed. Reportedly, the Baha'i faith is defined by the government as a political "sect" linked to the Pahlavi monarchy and, therefore, as counterrevolutionary. Unlike the recognized religious minorities who are allowed by the government to establish community centers and certain cultural, social, sports, or charitable associations, followers of the Baha'i faith have been denied the right to assemble officially or to maintain administrative institutions since 1983.

The property rights of Baha'is generally are disregarded. Properties belonging to the Baha'i community as a whole, such as places of worship and graveyards, were confiscated by the government in the years after the 1979 revolution and, in some cases, defiled. The government's seizure of Baha'i personal property, as well as its denial of access to education and employment, continue to erode the economic base of the Baha'i community.

Christians

Recently, the authorities have become increasingly assertive in curbing proselytizing activities by evangelical Christians, whose services were conducted in Persian. Government officials closed evangelical churches and arrested converts. Members of evangelical congregations are required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which must be provided to the authorities. Worshipers are subject to identity checks by authorities posted outside congregation centers. Meetings for evangelical services are restricted by the authorities to Sundays, and church officials were ordered to inform the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance before admitting new members to their congregations. Mistreatment of evangelical Christians has continued in recent years. Christian groups have reported instances of government harassment of churchgoers in Tehran, in particular of worshipers at the Assembly of God congregation in the capital. Cited instances of harassment included conspicuous monitoring outside Christian premises by Revolutionary Guards to discourage Muslims or converts from entering church premises and demands for presentation of identity papers of worshipers inside.

Jews

Even though Jews are one of the recognized religious minorities, allegations of official discrimination are frequent. The government's anti-Israel stance, and the perception of much of the population that Jewish citizens supported Zionism and the state of Israel, created a threatening atmosphere for the small community. Jews

limited their contact with, and did not openly express support for, Israel out of fear of reprisal. Recent anti-American and anti-Israeli demonstrations included the denunciation of Jews, as opposed to the past practice of denouncing only Israel and Zionism, adding to the threatening atmosphere for the community. Jewish leaders were reportedly reluctant to draw attention to official mistreatment of their community due to fear of government reprisal. The 30,000-member Jewish community (the largest in the Middle East outside of Israel) enjoys somewhat more freedoms than Jewish communities in several other Muslim states. The Iranian Jews are allowed to visit Israel. However, the freedom of Iranian Jews to practice their religion is limited, and Iranian Jews remain reluctant to speak out for fear of reprisals. During 1993-1998, Iran executed five Jews who were allegedly spying for Israel.¹⁵ In June 1999, Iran arrested 13 Jews (mostly teachers, shopkeepers, and butchers) from the Shiraz area that it said were part of an “espionage ring” for Israel. After an April-June 2000 trial, ten of the Jews and two Muslims accomplices were convicted on July 1, 2000, receiving sentences ranging from 4 to 13 years. An appeals panel reduced the sentences, and all were released by April 2003.

Reaction to the Status of Minorities

Reportedly a number of writers, as well as cultural and political activists, have called for the full implementation of articles 15, 19, and 48 of Iranian Constitutional Law which support the rights of minorities.¹⁶ A letter signed by 777 writers, as well as by cultural and political activists, condemned the recent case of insult against the people of Azerbaijan. The signatories called on speakers, writers, novelists, historians, journalists, artists, and politicians interested in Iran’s national unity to avoid expressing chauvinistic views in what they write or say. They also added, “We demand laws that strictly ban any insult against the language, culture and religion of Iranian ethnic groups such as Azaries, Kurds, Baluchis and Turkmen; and to consider sanctions against those who insult them regardless of the offenders’ position.”¹⁷

International Rights Groups

In a show of force on March 12, 2007, a coalition of international human rights groups called on nine European government ministers visiting Geneva to reprimand Iran for its repression of women, dissidents, and religious and ethnic minorities. The letter by The Women’s Federation for World Peace; Hope for Africa; The Open Society Institute; and 25 other NGOs from across Europe, North America, Africa, and Asia protested Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki’s appearance that day at the U.N. Human Rights Council. They urged the German Foreign Minister

¹⁵ CRS Report RL32048, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses*, by Kenneth Katzman.

¹⁶ BBC Monitoring Middle East, “Hundreds of Iranian Activists Demand Respect for Minorities’ Rights,” June 2006.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Steinmeier, Dutch Foreign Minister Verhagen, Swedish Foreign Minister Bildt, and six other leaders to speak out during their turn at the council podium.¹⁸

On November 21, 2006, the U.N. General Assembly's Third Committee approved a draft resolution expressing serious concern about the human rights situation in Iran.¹⁹ The General Assembly noted the continuing harassment, intimidation, and persecution of human rights defenders, political opponents, ethnic and religious minorities, and other groups in Iran. The draft called upon the government of Iran to ensure full respect for, and to also eliminate violence against, women and girls, as well as discrimination that is based on religious, ethnic, or linguistic grounds.

In May 2006, Iran was defeated when it showed an interest in a seat on the U.N. Human Rights Council.²⁰ According to Hillel Neuer, Executive Director of UN Watch, "Iran's domestic and foreign policy is hostile to the very principles of human dignity and the principles of the universal declaration of human rights." Citing the country's egregious human rights violations of minorities, including the Baluchis, Kurds, and the 300,000-strong Baha'i community, coupled with its trampling of women's rights, he remarked, "Iran is probably the last country that should have submitted a candidacy for the Human Rights Council."²¹

Recently, Amnesty International released a public statement on February 26, 2007, citing a new wave of human rights violation on Iran's ethnic minorities. According to the public statement, Amnesty International is greatly concerned by continuing violations of the rights of members of Iran's ethnic minorities, including Iranian Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs. Kurdish rights activists have been detained and demonstrators killed or injured; and a Baluchi accused of responsibility for a bomb explosion on February 14, 2007, was executed just five days later.²²

Figure 1 shows the approximate location and settlements of some of the primary ethnic minority groups in Iran.

¹⁸ NGOs Urge European Leaders in Geneva to Protest Iranian Abuses, at [<http://www.unwatch.org/site/c.bdKKISNqEmG/b.1289203/apps/s/content.asp?ct=3658765>].

¹⁹ United Nations General Assembly, Third Committee Approves Draft Resolution Expressing Serious Concern about the Human Rights Situation in Iran.

²⁰ IRAN: Non-election to UN Human Rights Council Welcomed by Watchdog Group IRIN, May 10, 2006, at [<http://www.unwatch.org/site/c.bdKKISNqEmG/b.1289203/apps/s/content.asp?ct=2453759>].

²¹ Ibid.

²² Amnesty International USA, Public Statement. AI /020/2007 (Public) News Service No: 0392, February 2007, at [<http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?lang=e&id=ENGMDE130122007>].

Figure 1. Location and Settlements of Primary Ethnic Minorities in Iran



Boundaries are approximate and not authoritative. Minority Groups from CIA 2004 "Iran Country Profile." Iran map with insets: Population Density, Ethnoreligious Distribution, Key Petroleum Sector Facilities, Southern Caspian Energy Prospects and Strait of Hormuz. Map prepared by Congressional Cartography Program, 2007.